

Social Learning and Change

Howard Goldstein

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A story is told of a group of friends who heard about an incredible meal which the ruler of a far-off land served to all who were guests at his palace. Everyone who had visited the palace spoke glowingly about the assortment of foods and drink and particularly of the miraculously prepared main dish that always was served. Yet try as they might, the friends could find no one who actually had tasted this main course. So they chose one among them to travel to the distant palace, sample it for himself, and report about the experience to the others.

After an arduous journey the traveler indeed did find the palace and immediately received an invitation to dine upon the legendary meal. He entered the hall to find row upon row of buffet tables, sumptuous beyond his wildest imagination. Each table was filled with gourmet delights, rare wines, the finest fruit and produce. The traveler could not resist temptation; he went up and down the tables tasting everything in sight. It was all superb.

As he went through the aisles he tried to remember all that he sampled so he could share the experience with his friends, but soon he became too full and fell into a contented sleep. When he awoke he rushed to record all his adventures in his journal; alas, he could not remember if he had tasted the miraculous main course which he traveled so far to experience.

Howard Goldstein, in his writing of *Social Learning and Change*, shares much with the mythic traveler to the banquet. Clearly he and his colleagues have heard that approaches to human service more authentic than those which inform the typical social or mental health agency do indeed exist somewhere, and Goldstein has taken it upon himself to make the journey necessary to discover these approaches and share them with all concerned. He is particularly anxious to feast on phenomenology, a method for explicating human experience which many discuss but no one of his acquaintance seems to have encountered firsthand.

Goldstein's book is a journal of an intellectual banquet, a sumptuous

sampling of often tantalizing approaches to understanding the human experience. He brings us the vintage wines of Greek philosophers and 19th-century theoreticians. He teases us with the fiction of Sartre, Camus, and Philip Roth. He tries snack foods set out by behaviorists and gestaltists alike. And finally he does some really heavy dining on mid-20th-century personality theorists.

But what of the fabled main course, phenomenology as an approach to understanding human beings, our horizons and our goals? Although Goldstein mentions phenomenology and drops a name or two, such as Marvin Farber and Aron Gurwitsch, it is obvious that he became too overwhelmed with the enormity of the feast and never got to sink his teeth into its piece de resistance. In fact, Goldstein appears unsure of just what phenomenology really is. On the one hand he equates it with the cognitive perceptual approach of Combs and Snygg, and on the other he confuses it with the existential stance in philosophy. Even if he had tasted phenomenology, he probably would not have recognized it.

It is hard to believe that a traveler as hungry as Goldstein would have made the journey in search of a phenomenology without having encountered the works of Levinas, Schutz, Heidegger, or the Duquesne school of phenomenological psychology. Passing references to Merleau-Ponty and VanKaam are the only indications that Goldstein sampled the main course of phenomenology. He seems unaware of William Fischer's work on anxiety or Constance Fischer's on assessment and therapy. Missing too are the methodological writings of Amedeo Giorgi and the explications of client and patient experience of Anthony Barton. And the Duquesne series in phenomenology which has dealt with the issues of social learning and change is absent also.

If Goldstein indeed really missed the main course, he must be excused since he shares well the excitement of the rest of the feast which drew his attention and ultimately satiated his quest. *Social Learning and Change* is a brilliant book and reflects clearly the breadth of its author's knowledge and understanding. Although not phenomenological, it offers a coherent cognitive approach to the provision of human service, locating a wide variety of intervention strategies within a model of human learning. The book is divided into three sections: Learning and Change: Philosophical and Treatment Foundations; Self, Perception and Learning; and The Process of Social Learning and Change.

In the first section Goldstein contrasts the generally accepted positivistic approach to knowledge with the more radical teleological inquiry and opts for the latter as a necessary foundation for a theory of change. He promises that his teleological inquiry will be transactional (which it is) and will be a

phenomenology (which it is not).

The second section draws heavily on the work of Gordon Allport and particularly on his conceptualization of "the proprium." Goldstein uses the proprium as the focus for a bewildering array of self-hyphenated terms drawn equally from obscure and well known personality theorists. Somehow he manages to combine these diverse approaches into a useable model of how individuals, families, and groups develop, learn, and change. The writing jumps from in-depth theoretical considerations to excerpts of counseling sessions which can be illuminated by the emerging theory. While the author often delights in savoring the flavor of some of his favorite concepts, he frequently returns the reader to the real world illustrations from a human service environment.

Although the book's third section would appear to be the practical culmination of the previously constructed model, it contains a continued unfolding of concepts and insights. But now the pieces do come together, and Goldstein demonstrates how each step in the change process requires different intervention strategies in order to prepare the person to move forward to the next point in development. This section is not a collection of recipes or formulas which the uninitiated can employ as needed by following a few simple rules; rather it is an illustration of Goldstein's power as a theorist who understands the role of each strategy as it contributes to the goal of making a person whole.

The book's dust jacket suggests that both students and professionals are the anticipated audience of this work, but for each group there is a major caveat. Students should not pick up *Social Learning and Change* with the expectation of finding a how-to-do-it manual; professionals should not open this book unless they want their most basic assumptions about human service questioned and challenged. For Goldstein has learned much from his journey to the banquet; he at least has glimpsed approaches to human service which offer far more to both the client and professional than most of what passes for "helping" in conventional settings. His report of what he tasted cannot be ignored. At the very least other travelers will be prompted to seek out the feast of alternative, more authentically human, ways of being with people, and perhaps, just perhaps, some of them will remain hungry enough to taste phenomenology.